"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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A Rural Church Program for the Next Fifty Years

by Alexander Nunn*

A hundred years ago that philosopher, naturalist, and needler of his neighbors' consciences, Henry David Thoreau, made this entry in his diary:

"They who are ready to go are already invited."

The rural people of this country have never been more earnest in inviting the churches of America to help them grow in the knowledge and fellowship of Jesus and his teachings. Churches that are ready to go have not only been invited; they are already making records for all of us who will to read.

I should like to offer as a basis for future rural church planning a half dozen assumptions, the facts of which you can verify for yourself from any number of sources.

1. First of all, the number of farms and of farm families will continue to decrease and possibly faster in the South than in some other sections. American farm population reached a peak around 1910, at somewhat above 32,000,000. It showed no marked change until about 1940. Since then, farm population has dropped rapidly. In April, 1954, we had on farms an estimated 21,890,000 or between 13 and 14 per cent of our total population. Only the phenomenal increase in farm productivity has made this exodus from the farm possible. Per man-hour worked, the farmer is today producing about three times as much as he did in 1910. He is producing nearly twice as much per man-hour as he did in 1940. In the first half of the 19th century every farm worker supported himself and about three other persons. In other

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* An address delivered before the 3rd Quadrennial Convocation, Southeastern Jurisdiction. The Methodist Church, Charlotte, N. C., February 3, 1955. Mr. Alexander Nunn is Executive Editor of "The Progressive Farmer" and he takes an active interest in the Church and rural life. Used by kind permission.

words, he did little more than care for his own family. It was impossible for cities and urban industry to develop very far. There was no surplus of food to support them. By 1940, every farm worker was feeding and clothing himself and about 10 others. Today, every farm worker is feeding himself and about 17 others.

But even so, the Southeast will continue to be the most rural part of America.

2. My second assumption is that total U.S. and world population will continue to increase by phenomenal strides. Population experts are now beginning to say that we may reach 190,000,000 people by 1965. Hardly more than three or four years ago we were speculating that we might reach that figure by 1975. As of today, we are increasing at the rate of 2,500,000 annually, which is more people than the entire state of Mississippi by about 300,000 and about as many as the combined population of Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, Montana, Vermont, and New Hampshire. In the lifetime of many of us, in the year 1900, this country had but 75,000,000 people.

Whether this present trend will continue nobody can say.

If you want to visualize in another way what present trends mean, try thinking, with present living standards, of four plates where there are now three, four cars where there are now three, four homes where there are now three, four people to be reached with the Christian gospel where there are now three. Where we now hear so much loose talk about farm surpluses you may be hearing talk of real shortages--and you may be clamoring for price ceilings.

Estimates of world population have placed the total figure at 919,000,000 in 1800; 1,571,000,000 in 1900; somewhere between 3.3 and 4 billion by 1980. While we in America are eating 20 per cent better, some countries in the world are not eating as well as they did before World War II. Most of the people of the world, that is the great majority, go to bed every night hungry.

In this almost certain pyramiding of food needs, the South offers more opportunities for increased production of food and fiber than all the rest of the country combined.

3. The third assumption I would advance is that the industrial growth of the South will continue and that the growth of the South and the West relatively will outstrip other areas. If you will study a map of the nation's industrial expansion in recent years you will find that it is a great arc swinging down the Atlantic Seaboard, across the South, across to California, and all the way to Washington in the Northwest. There has of course been huge expansion also in the highly industrialized Michigan-Ohio-Illinois area. The significant thing about this expansion in the South is that so much of it is coming in

towns, small cities, and even the open country. Even when a new industry picks one of our larger cities, it is likely to be on the periphery, drawing its working force from many miles around and not from the heart of the city itself. That means suburban or small town dwellers or part-time farmers or maybe dirt farmers with one or more members of the family driving to and from work in town each day. It means a new type of town or village or open country church as so many of you well know. A recent study of the nation's ten largest cities showed that the metropolitan area was growing twice as fast as the central city itself.

4. We are bound to assume, I think, that all of the nation will become more alike in eating habits, in customs, in dress, and in thinking. Better schools, mass means of communication, increasing travel, and increasing mobility thru better highways are making us so. And while this trend may make us all a more sophisticated people, I don't think it necessarily follows that we will be more urbanized. Urban and suburban families will have more gardened and landscaped homes, with flowers, fruits, garden, perhaps small animals or poultry and a home work shop. Your rural or farm family that doesn't already have them will have the conveniences that in years gone by were thought to belong to the "bright lights."

I believe there will continue to be distinct rural needs just as there will be distinct cultural needs in other vocations and in varying regions of the country.

5. In our own publication planning we are going on the belief that the farm family will be increasingly well educated, better housed, and stronger financially.

If there are fewer farmers, they will be better farmers even than we have today and they're likely to stay in their community and likely on the farm where they settle down.

6. A final assumption I am risking is that the nations of the world somehow are going to avoid the catastrophe of an atomic World War III. I'm putting my faith in a God that does still rule the universe and somehow I believe he is going to guide men toward a new kind of world peace. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear." (Isaiah 59)

If I believed that an atomic war were imminent or likely to face us in the next twenty-five years I think I should spend all the time allotted me this morning in an impassioned plea to The Methodist Church to put all its future effort into the rural field. If any civilization survived an atomic war it would come from the country, from the farthest reacnes of the country, the open plains, the coast country, the mountains and the nearly abandoned wastelands where families are today barely eking out a living. There would be no cities and heavily populated areas left.

As something of a corollary to this belief and partly as explaining it, I expect to see America continue to grow in world-mindedness. We hardly have an alternative. We have been virtually forced to accept world leadership and a world viewpoint whether we desired it or not. That of itself will in my opinion bring added prosperity not only to all American farmers but especially to our Southern farmers. Of all farm groups, we have the most to gain from freer trade and world cooperation.

"What then is a vital, soul-saving and spirit-lifting rural church program for the next fifty years?" In answer, I find myself echoing the words of Paul, slightly paraphrased, toward the close of his letter to the Romans:

"I myself am satisfied about you brethren, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. But on some points I desire to speak to you very boldly by way of reminder."

A. There is no one thing that will mean as much to the future of the rural church as a denomination-wide church that truly believes God is over all, that Jesus saves, that he lives among men today, that he does remake men's lives, that we can do all things thru Christ who strengthens us, and that every last one of us individually has a responsibility for helping to bring to pass the kingdom of God among men. Here in an age when astronomers tell us we live in a universe of a hundred million worlds, maybe a hundred hundred million worlds, we almost seem at times to try to persuade ourselves that God is an arrogant little tribal god, ruling over a few thousand square miles. We are beginning to learn of the very structure of the universe and to talk in millions of light years and yet we still find those who seem to want to make God a God for America, or for the white race, or maybe of Western civilization, or a God of some narrow, bigoted, ecclesiastical fantasy. We have mere machines today that can do almost everything and then we try to circumscribe the love of God. "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" Paul cried out with all the earnestness of his soul. We talk about pewee churches when our trouble is pewee thinking and pewee religion.

How many of us really believe that if God is for us, who can be against us? We preach on Sunday, berating the people for their poor

attendance and we can't get out early enough to see what goes on in Sunday school. Have you ever tried to figure out where some of our young pastors go on fifth Sundays? In our quarterly conference we concern ourselves about a hundred details, most of which are needful, but it always seems to me like reaching for a handful of copper coins when for the price of walking over the nearby hill we could get a fortune -- a fortune in lives remade, new hope planted, a boy or girl stimulated to rise to the potential God had put within his or her heart and mind. Dr. J. Q. Schisler told Jim Sells and me that one of the first steps toward his future was built when a red-headed country school teacher in Arkansas asked him one day, "Quinton, had you ever thought about wearing a white collar?"

I would that we had half the breadth and the grasp of fundamentals of the old Negro preacher in North Georgia trying to explain eternity to his congregation. "Brethren," he said, "if tomorrow morning a hummingbird lighted on Stone Mountain and carried away one tiny grain of granite and then if every 10,000 years he came back to get one more grain, by the time he got Stone Mountain moved it ain't even breakfast yet." God save us from the littleness of professional Christians.

A Christ-filled church would find time and techniques to meet rural needs, needs of industrial areas, and of the great inner city, as well as of the great spreading suburban areas of this area.

B. From the standpoint of our ministry to rural people I would expect to see such a rebirth begin with our church colleges and seminaries. I know that all our college leaders would say, undoubtedly with some emphasis, "Why, we're training Christian leaders for tomorrow." The literal truth is that on the whole we're training Christian leaders for the larger towns and cities. The very atmosphere and the curriculum are calculated to make city and urban-minded ministers -- and I know my friends in Emory, Duke, S.M.U., Boston U. will understand how highly we rate their contributions to rural ministerial training. We're not training for either rural or industrial pastorates. In fact, I'm not convinced that the church yet agrees with the author of "Man and God in the City." "The church must come to grip with the problems of the people it would serve." In our own denomination, we're not yet willing, with some rather remarkable exceptions, to allow a young minister to dedicate himself to work in the rural field. We don't yet quite believe that many small, subtle differences in people matter and yet by changing one letter we would have the ridiculous sight of a pack of "h"ogs chasing a red fox. We continue to need to learn the point of a story I picked up recently. A bright, ambitious, very learned young agricultural worker just out of college had been sent to his new position in midwinter. His first trip out over the county led him back into an isolated mountain cove where the families were killing hogs. Stopping at one farm, he noticed as he walked up onto the front porch that one animal had been scraped and was swinging from the scaffold. After he had exchanged greetings with the man of the house and explained who he was, he remarked to make

conversation, "I suppose you anticipate consuming the edible portions of that carcass on your own premises."

"Well, I don't know about that," the farmer answered, "we killed it to eat."

This matter of early training of our future ministers goes beyond an understanding of the people whom we serve. It calls for some confidence in their future and a zeal to help them improve their lot. Somebody, somewhere ought to be helping these young ministers to realize that rural pastorates may never be a program of bringing tremendous numbers of new members into the church. The greater opportunity may come in helping those within the church to grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God and their fellowmen, and to become ambassadors of Christ wherever they go. In short, they need to learn techniques of working with the same families year after year. For the urban situation, it seems to me the great need may often be to bring uprooted, highly-mobile families to a new sense of community and religious life. There may be the place for real mass evangelism techniques.

Auburn's retiring dean and founder of its School of Education, Zebulon Judd, a man who was for some years lay leader of the Alabama Conference, tells this story. There came a letter from a former student saying, "I've been five years principal of a small country high school. I want you to make it possible for me to get a bigger job."

Dean's reply contained some other things but the essence of it was found in one sentence, "My friend, has it ever occurred to you that you might make a bigger job of the job you have?" I say to you in all sincerity that many rural charges are not paying more than they are purely because their ministers are not trying to make a bigger job of the job they have.

To me this whole matter of training young men for the ministry involves some basic philosophy of what the church is for. If we merely want our ministers to rail out against the more obvious sins of the age on Sunday, marry the young, baptize the babies, bury the dead, do some casual visiting of the sick, then we don't need to train them to help bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Woodrow Wilson said of Teddy Roosevelt's explosive energy: "Life does not consist after all in eternally running to a fire." Nor we might add, "in eternally running away from a fire." I realize we have a good many laymen who still seem to want that kind of ministry. But I can't believe that either ministers or laymen in that category are going to do much to either build a better world or improve their chances in eternity.

Not long ago Raymond W. Miller, Methodist churchman and FAO consultant, associated with Harvard University, said to a group of us, "Most of the world's problems are still rural and we're failing because we're trying to solve them with urban methods." Over and

over in our cooperating "Rural Minister of the Year" program with Emory University we have ministers, in 15 different denominations, building new churches, doubling and tripling and quadrupling salaries and benevolent contributions, and bringing increasing numbers of people to Jesus Christ as they went out and made themselves a part of the life of the country people whom they served. By their every day lives they helped make Christ real to men and women, boys and girls.

I'm not arguing that we need trained farmers in our pulpits. I'm trying to say that we do need ministers who know something about agriculture's place in the American economic and social order. We do need ministers who have enough knowledge and enough zeal to want to understand the New Testament and to follow Jesus' teachings. Jesus reached people by understanding their everyday problems and making himself a part of their everyday life.

Somehow too, we need some way to acquaint church leaders with the broad problems and opportunities in agriculture, so that they won't have only the viewpoint they're now getting from the newspapers, the radio, and general magazines. You know there's nobody knows as much about farming as certain types of successful men in urban fields who read the daily papers and who have a friend who has a 2,000-acre cattle farm who supports it from his other earnings. Two hundred years ago Adam Smith, father of all economists, declared that "the policy of governments has been more favorable to manufacturing, the industry of the towns, than to agriculture, the industry of the country."

Just a few months ago the distinguished philosopher, Bertrand Russell, writing in the New York Times from an assumed vantage point of 2,000 A.D. noted that "We, from the secure haven of the dawning twenty-first century, can see what was less obvious at the time: that the Nineteen Fifties saw the beginning of the new trend which has transformed the world. There were certain problems of which at the time foresighted people were conscious. One of these was that in every civilized country, industry was favored at the expense of agriculture, with the result that the world's food supply was diminishing. Another was the rapid growth of population in backward countries, which resulted from advances in medicine and hygiene. A third was the chaos that was in danger of resulting from the collapse of European imperialism."

C. We need to approach a rural church program for the next 50 years in the knowledge that whereas American agriculture in the past was built on physical pioneering, it must in the future come from spiritual pioneering. For the first 280 years of American settlement and expansion we could always believe that there were new opportunities, new treasures to be had simply by moving on, new land for the homesteading. The spirit of inexhaustible opportunity in our pioneer history put a dynamic quality, a youthful spirit, an optimistic way of thinking into our national life that we cannot fail to recognize. The rough, hard, often crude and bitter frontier life also did other things for us. As Bishop Hoyt Dobbs said to a student convocation at Auburn years ago, "If there is anything to the old belief

that men must sometimes fight, the boy who has plowed new ground with a one-horse scooter plow has faced the moral equivalent of war."

The pioneer of the future must say to himself, "Life can be made better where I am; this farm can be made better; my neighbors and I have within us the abilities and the potential to build a better community and school and church life. My soils must be saved from here on, built back, and made richer."

It's a kind of pioneering that will be a lot harder than the pioneering of the past. Any culture and any civilization as it becomes more stable and more permanent runs the risk of becoming static and stagnant, eventually decadent. It can grow infinitely richer, not merely in material things, but in spiritual and cultural levels, or it can decay. As Mr. Toynbee would tell us, it becomes a matter of challenge and response.

This pioneering of the spirit has another facet. Something over two years ago I threw what proved to be almost a bombshell into our own Editorial Board when I proposed to them that the time had come for us to take as an important part of our overall program the definite fostering of a truly rural culture in the South. I didn't have to wait for a reaction.

"Why," they said, "we're already doing that. We're giving more space now to cultural subjects than any other magazine. That's our trouble. We've got more culture now than we need." But I wasn't talking about "cultural subjects"; I was thinking of an indigenous "rural culture." I was thinking of the methods Bishop Grundtvig used in revolutionizing the agriculture of Denmark. For us it might include such things as recreation, rural drama, rural music and rural literature; the Lord's Acre program for our churches with all the opportunities for pageantry, symbolism, and group participation which it offers; it would include a lot of history, including local history; it leads into all of community, school and church life. It would promote what someone said to me recently, "The secret of a vital growing rural church is the same secret as that of a successful urban church -- fellowship." It builds people with stronger moral fiber, deeper spiritual living, lifts economic levels, builds righteous pride in family, neighbors, and community.

Well, we haven't yet set down in so many words or so many plans a long-time goal for a Southern "Rural culture," but we're making progress. And we claim no copyright on the idea.

As just one example of progress I could point out that last fall our subscribers ordered nearly 50,000 copies of Christmas plays written especially to fit rural church needs. We're now making plans to expand that into a year-round service.

So I say to you that we shall need pioneering of the spirit and the church must accept a definite responsibility for it.

D. To me the counterpart of more realistic ministerial training is continuing and long time program of rural stewardship. I have said over and over in recent years that I did not believe our basic rural church problem today was lack of income; and that no group in our population could be reached more directly and more effectively with a stewardship program than our farm people. The good farmer today knows there is no chance for success if he is not a good steward of his time, his land, his cattle, his timber -- all his resources. He also knows more simply and more directly than those of any other vocation, how all things come from God. He sees it every day in the weather, the miracle of birth and growth and death, the changing seasons, in sunup and sundown. How can he fail to see the whole principle of stewardship? I don't believe it's a long step from there to Christian stewardship.

THEY SHOULD BE CLOSE TO GOD

by Philip Jerome Cleveland

They should be close to God who plow the earth,
Tear up the briers and turn the nettles in,
Bank high the rich brown soil and smooth it down
And harrow paths for life, straight, firm and thin.

They should be men of faith and vision, all
Who sight in each torn, trampled plot a yield
Of sun-gold harvests; ears have they to hear
The secrets whispered by a growing field.

. . . . . .

When snows have gone and all the trembling clod
Wakes with the trumpeting of spring. Men know,
Who keep the fields, the miracles of God.

E. One natural teammate, maybe sometimes an outgrowth, of stewardship is lay speaking. If at any time in the foreseeable future we are to give adequate leadership to all our rural churches it will in my opinion have to come through lay speaking. When our jurisdiction must look to supply pastors to fill a third of its charges -- with charges and opportunities for charges growing faster than we are training ministers, we've got to do something. Our Methodists brethren in Great Britain have held their church together with lay preachers. Here in America and the South with a far greater percentage of pastors to churches, it ought to be possible to make use of lay speaking to give the church new drive and new power.

Under the leadership of a consecrated dynamic young lawyer and farmer, Ralph Paul, the Alabama Conference today has over 500 lay speakers serving 275 churches with an estimated 330 services every month. One district has already reached the goal of a service in every church every Sunday. There may be 1,000 to 1,200 certified lay speakers a year from now. Most recently, our conference lay program has been expanded with conference directors for lay speaking, Christian stewardship, Methodist men, and Christian literature and training. We don't think there is anything else like it in Methodism. I can boast of these things for others made the record.

Our church simply must fully awaken itself to the full potential of today's lay movement within it. I believe a careful study of church history will show that we have never in the history of the American church had anything that approaches today's possibilities. We must not allow any narrow ecclesiasticism to hamper it.

This lay potential awaits only a challenge to, "Come, let us do things for God." I venture to say to you that our own conference lay leader has given more of his working hours to the church, without purse and without price, than 75 per cent of our preachers. I know that he gives around 40 per cent of his time to the church and that he has been traveling 25,000 to 30,000 miles per year with no pay whatever except mileage on his car, plus actual cash expenses incurred on some of his longer trips.

I would also add here that any church program worth the name ought to be one that really challenges rural people. An apologetic, consoling, "We know you're doing the best you can," isn't going to get us anywhere. If you'll allow me to speak with a bit of poetic license, there's still a Canaan over every hill.

F. Along with lay speaking must come new techniques to supervise young ministers or older men just entering the ministry. I wouldn't think of hiring a young college graduate and sending him out alone on an important assignment, nor would hardly any other businessman. Few educators would think of putting young, inexperienced men and women into an unsupervised field; a young farmer brought up in farming is likely to have daily or weekly counsel from his father, his landlord, or neighbors on adjoining farms. Yet as Methodists we're sending our inexperienced preachers out into much more important assignments, and virtually on their own. Our congregational churches, especially our Baptist friends, partly compensate for this need by the very nature of their system -- within-the-church administration. But even their young ministers, from my observations, need far more help than their congregations are giving them.

One key answer to this problem is, I believe, the group ministry -- and I use that term knowing that we haven't yet agreed among ourselves as to what it is. I'm thinking of church setups whereby a consecrated, experienced minister in a county seat or other larger town would be definitely and directly responsible for super-

vising two to several ministers on smaller charges around him. And I don't mean once a month or once a quarter supervision. I'm think ing of pastorages where one experienced man with one or more less experienced will jointly serve a number of churches, maybe even to the division of types of work each will do.

Another answer to needed supervision could come thru regular field work by our district superintendents. If our D.S.'s are too overloaded to give that time over the district, then I feel quite certain in my own mind they need only to let the laymen throughout the church know what extra help or relief is needed to provide that field time and they'd get it.

In many instances, I believe small rural churches might be tied directly to strong county seat churches. The old fears of cultural differences, different living standards, different friends, no longer hold true as has sometimes been true in the past. In many instances today the minister would talk to a more educated, better informed people in his country church than he would in his town church.

Altogether, as I see it, this broad problem is primarily one of open-mindedness, of willingness to consider new techniques and new methods to meet very real needs. There's no use in arguing that this or that won't work. One of our editors used to say, "There's nothing so impossible as what we think is impossible." Or, as the engineering genius Charlie Kettering has said, "It's not the things you don't know that hurt you but the things you're so certain of that aren't so."

G. One essential of a good rural church program I really should have incorporated in what I tried to say about rural culture and spiritual pioneering: We need a church program and a ministry that will bring more of beauty into all of rural life -- not merely in buildings but in music, in preaching services, in surroundings and landscaping, in farmstead layout and farm programs, in all of everyday living. I have left its mention until this point for I have wanted to lift it up and give it emphasis. Edwin Markham once said that the three great needs of man were "Bread, Beauty, and Brotherhood." Our own longtime goal has been "To make the South a land of plenty, a land of beauty, and a land of rural comradeship." An old college classmate of mine, a good nurseryman today, and by the way a man who forfeited an inheritance of somewhere between $20,000 and $50,000 that he might have a Methodist wife and be a Methodist himself, said to me a few weeks ago, "I've never lost a penny from people who paid me by check for shrubbery or flowers. I've been in this game for twenty years and I've sold to people in nearly every state in the eastern United States, I reckon. Somehow folks who love flowers have higher moral standards." Many of you over the years must have learned to judge homes and families by the flowers and general surroundings when you first drive up.

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The total possibilities in this field are almost limitless.

What do you see when you see a country church? A lonely cemetery? A building with no claims to architectural fame? A one-room structure where you say Sunday school lessons can never be taught? The last stronghold of an economic order that is already dead? An altar to which only the dead to be laid to rest in the churchyard nearby are brought? An assignment to be filled, just because it would look bad to encourage the charge to ask that it be closed?

Let me tell you a few of the things that stand out vividly to me. From the open country church and neighborhood of my boyhood now finding it some trouble to raise a few hundred dollars yearly, the calls of bob whites along the edges of the surrounding swamps on sunny Sunday summer mornings, and some of its products: an editor of our Alabama Christian Advocate; another editor of the same who has always looked back with special pride to the family friendships and relationships developed when his father was its minister a hundred years ago; a Westinghouse vice president; a state supervisor of home economics education; two distinguished school superintendents and an assistant college president; good farmers and good teachers whose lives were felt in their own communities. From the small town key-congregation of that same circuit, where I joined the church, today's chief justice of Alabama's Supreme Court and many others who have made their mark in public life. From my home church for the last thirty-five years and from the Baptist congregation in the same village, 42 or 44 boys to serve in World War II with but one rejection when Uncle Sam was complaining loudly about having to reject 30 and 40 per cent of all draftees and volunteers. So many became officers that one little fellow in the community asked one day, "Mamma, where are they going to get the soldiers to fight the battles?"

From other churches and other communities, I see such a steady stream of preachers that until recent years most of our ministers have come from rural areas.

Looking to the future I see strong Christian men and women, well educated, with high moral principles and a keen sense of justice and essential democracy providing the great balance wheel of America's future. I see men and women who will be known as good farmers and good farm homemakers, maybe workers in industries or services in the community but rooted in the land, who will give distinguished leadership in county, church, state and national affairs. To contribute to the building of such a rural culture that is in its deepest sense Christian, is I submit, a challenge worthy of the best efforts of our church in these next fifty years. Let us so run that rural people of tomorrow may attain the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.